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Plan to Build NIH-Funded Bat Research Lab in Colorado Sparks Fears of Lab Leak

Colorado State University officials deny the controversial bat disease research lab will conduct gain-of-function experiments, but locals opposed to the facility cite evidence the university is already conducting risky research on deadly pathogens.

By Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D.

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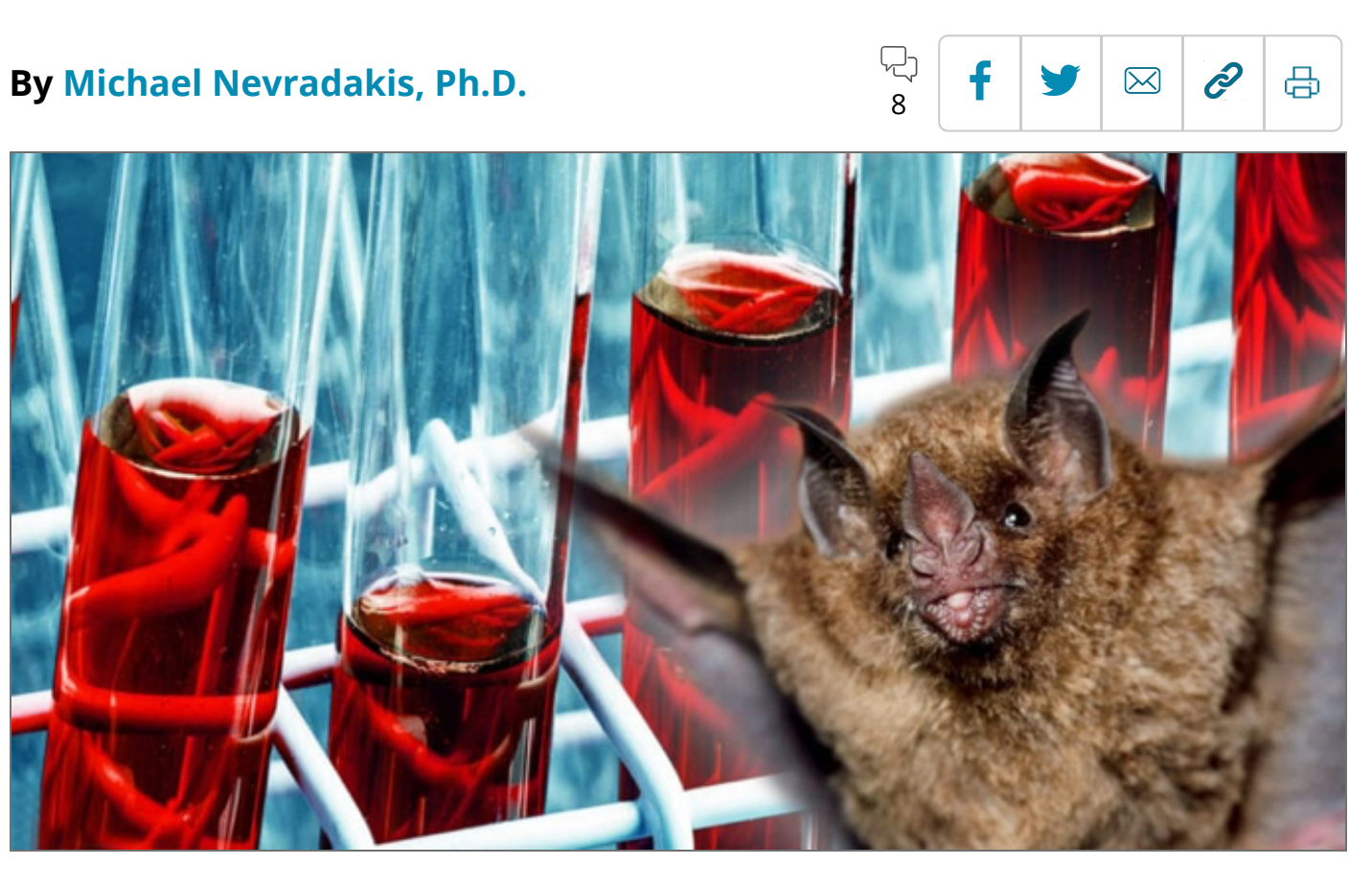

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Colorado State University (CSU) is proceeding with controversial plans to construct a new research facility to study bat diseases with funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Construction is slated to be completed sometime in 2024 or 2025.

University officials and proponents of the new facility argue the laboratory is necessary to enhance research capabilities looking into emerging diseases and viruses resulting from zoonotic — animal-to-human — transfer.

While CSU denies that gain-of-function research will occur at the laboratory, some researchers connected with the new facility previously were associated with actors involved with such research, including experiments conducted in Wuhan, China.

Francis Boyle, J.D., Ph.D., a bioweapons expert and professor of international law at the University of Illinois, is concerned about the facility.

Boyle told The Defender:

> "It is well known that Colorado State University has a long and ongoing history of specialization in weaponizing insects with biowarfare agents for delivery to human beings.
>
> "This new lab will magnitudinally increase CSU's offensive biowarfare capabilities, in gross violation of the Biological Weapons Convention of 1972 and my Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989 that provides for life in prison."

Area residents, including a local grassroots group, and bioweapons experts, also have raised concerns over the potentially risky research, involving deadly viruses, that will be conducted at the facility and the risk of a lab leak akin to that which may have occurred at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China, and may have led to escape of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Christine Bowman leads a group of local citizens who formed the Covid Bat Research Moratorium of Colorado (CBRMC), a grassroots initiative opposing the new facility. The group has launched efforts such as a yard sign campaign to raise local awareness.

In an interview with The Defender, Bowman described being "stonewalled" by state and local officials and by CSU.

"We need answers as to how COVID-19 was modified to transfer from human to human before I will be satisfied that it's okay to raise diseased bats to study in my neighborhood," Bowman said.

"Now that we know that the COVID pandemic likely started from a lab leak in Wuhan, China, we are questioning the safety of continuing such research," she added.

CSU receives 'tens of millions of dollars' in NIH research grants annually

According to The Colorodoan, the Chiropteran Research Facility, as it will be known, "would serve as a breeding facility to raise and care for bats of various species that can be used as research models in studies on a wide range of human viruses that are believed to have originated with bats."

The laboratory will be constructed on the south end of CSU's Foothills Campus near Fort Collins, at 3105 Rampart Road, within the Justin Harper Research Complex and adjacent to the university's existing Center for Vector-Borne Infectious Diseases (CVID). It will consist of a 14,000-square-foot stand-alone bat vivarium.

According to CSU, the university "is a world leader in research on zoonotic infections. The University's scientists have been studying bats and other vectors that transmit dengue fever, Zika and West Nile viruses for more than 30 years."

Construction is scheduled to begin by this summer. The Colorodoan reported the facility is expected to open in fall 2024, while CSU said it will be completed by 2025.

CVID, formerly known as the Arthropod-born and Infectious Diseases Laboratory, was founded in 1984. According to The Colorodoan, it "currently houses the only captive breeding colonies of two species of bats used in its research."

CVID's website describes the facility as "a longstanding multi-disciplinary research and training center" whose researchers "have been successful in defining mechanisms of pathogen persistence and transmission, and developing new surveillance, control, and prevention strategies for vector-borne and emerging zoonotic diseases."

"World-class facilities, including BSL-3 [biosafety level 3] laboratories and large insectary complexes, provide an outstanding scientific environment for researchers inside and outside CSU wanting to manipulate pathogens in vertebrate hosts and arthropod vectors," the CVID website states.

The BSL3 laboratory in question is CSU's Regional Biocontainment Laboratory, which operates with the support of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and is part of the university's 120,000-square-foot Infectious Disease Research Center. It houses bats and samples of numerous deadly bacteria and viruses.

In October 2021, the NIH awarded a $6.7 million grant to CSU's microbiology, immunology and pathology department at the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences to construct the new bat vivarium.

Alan Rudolph, CSU's vice president for research, told The Colorodoan the university will provide the remaining funds for the facility's construction, the cost of which is expected to range between $8-9 million.

Rudolph said CSU receives "tens of millions of dollars" in NIH research grants annually.

'Highly pathogenic' agents will be housed at new facility

The CVID already conducts research involving viruses related to "chikungunya, dengue, malaria, Rift Valley fever, Zika virus, COVID-19, MERS, influenza [and] hantavirus disease." The new facility will expand those capabilities.

According to the minutes of the Feb. 3, 2022, meeting of CSU's Board of Governors, the new facility is justified due to the capacity it will have to study "emerging zoonotic viruses that originate in bats and cause high mortality in humans: SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2, Ebola virus, Marburg virus, Nipah virus and Hendra virus."

It is unclear under what biosafety level the new facility will operate, but Bowman told The Defender:

> "From what I understand, this facility is slated to be a BSL2. But what's to keep that from increasing in the future without approval or informing the public? What guarantee do the residents of Fort Collins have that the lab won't increase from a BSL2 to BSL4, where even more dangerous viruses will be studied?"

CSU claims it "has no plans to conduct gain-of-function research of concern" there.

"Who decides what criteria we use for 'concern'?" Bowman asked.

Rebecca Moritz, CSU's biosafety director, said, "This will be the only facility like it in the United States," and it will give students "the opportunity to learn directly from the researchers conducting this research in their classes."

She added:

> "CSU researchers have safely studied and worked with bats and other vectors for over 30 years. … Due to global warming and population growth, humans and animals are coming into contact more frequently and in ways not previously seen. This could result in an increased number of outbreaks and possibly pandemics.
>
> "The main purpose of this facility will be to house bat breeding colonies for CSU researchers and researchers around the United States and the world. This facility will allow an expansion of CSU's current work, including projects focusing on the role that bats play in disease transmission and the development of vaccines and therapeutics."

"Personnel who will work in this facility will be highly trained and be required [to] adhere to strict biosafety and biosecurity practices," Moritz claimed.

Moritz has spoken publicly about her involvement with gain-of-function research, including at the 2014 Gain of Function Symposium. At the time, Moritz was part of the Biosecurity Task Force at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Bowman said gain-of-function experiments are already being conducted at CSU and that the university is open about it.

"We are only aware that CSU is conducting gain-of-function on plants and mosquitoes because it is mentioned in the link they send to anyone who emails them or questions their research."

Rudolph told The Colorodoan, "Bat research is not new to our campus; bat-research facilities are not new to our campus. It's an expansion of existing work in existing facilities that have already made great impacts."

Such research "helped us to develop vaccines, helped us to develop diagnostics to better determine who's getting sick, why are they getting sick, when are they getting sick, and vaccines that help treat those people when they do get sick," he added.

Some of the viruses for which research will be conducted at the new facility, including Hendra and Nipah, are considered "highly pathogenic BSL-4 agents," classified "in the same biosecurity category as Ebola."

The Nipah virus, for instance, has a high human mortality rate ranging between 40 and 75%. It "causes a rapidly progressive disease, which includes acute respiratory infection and encephalitis that can lead to coma or death."

Earlier this month, the NIH reinstated a controversial federal grant, originally issued in 2014 under Dr. Anthony Fauci, then-director of NIAID, which operates under the NIH, to EcoHealth Alliance to study the risk of bat coronavirus spillover.

This involved gain-of-function research for the genetic manipulation of coronaviruses to make them more infectious to humans. Some of the NIH funds were sent to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which collaborated with EcoHealth Alliance on this research.

EcoHealth is a New York-based nonprofit that says its mission is to develop "science-based solutions to prevent pandemics and promote conservation."

Documents revealed by U.S. Right to Know (USRTK) indicate that some CSU researchers have previously collaborated with the EcoHealth Alliance.

Local activists 'stonewalled' by university, state, local officials

According to The Colorodoan, CSU's campus planner, Gargi Duttgupta, told local authorities that the new facility would be approximately 316 feet north of the fence that marks the campus' boundary with adjacent residential communities.

This may be too close for comfort for some area residents, who have attempted to engage with CSU and with local planning authorities to express opposition to the new facility and to obtain further information about its construction.

Their opposition led to the establishment of CBRMC, "a nonpartisan grassroots organization run on a budget of $0 by a group of concerned citizens from across the political spectrum."

CBRMC says its mission is to put a moratorium on the construction of the new facility "until we first know what happened with the possible COVID bat lab leak and gain-of-function research in Wuhan, China."

Some CBRMC members spoke at a Dec. 21, 2022, meeting of the Larimer County Planning Commission, expressing fears of a potential leak from the new facility, drawing comparisons with the suspected Wuhan lab leak.

But the planning commission unanimously approved the project. Lesli Ellis, Larimer County's community development director, told The Colorodoan that no further approvals are needed before construction can commence.

According to The Colorodoan, "CSU officials insist that the new facility is merely an extension of work that has been done on its Foothills Campus for more than 30 years by the university and others, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and U.S. Department of Agriculture."

The CSU Foothills Campus houses lab operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Wildlife Research Center and the Rocky Mountain Prevention Research Center — described as the "second-largest CDC lab outside of Atlanta."

"Strict safety protocols will be in place to prevent the escape of a virus or infected bat," The Colorodoan also reported.

Rudolph told The Colorodoan the facility will need only dozens to hundreds — not thousands — of bats, which will be acquired by the U.S. government, "quarantined well outside the United States and deemed safe and not sick before they come to us."

CSU does 'not have a good track record' on safety

A Jan. 11 CSU "Q&A on why CSU labs are safe" denies that illegal bioweapons research will take place at the institution and quotes Moritz, who said, "We do everything possible to decrease the risks of our research." However, she acknowledged "there is no such thing as zero risk in research."

Bowman said CSU alone will oversee safety at the new facility, and she questioned the lab's safety record.

Bowman told The Defender:

> "After letting chronic wasting disease [CWD] leak from their labs at CSU, hundreds of thousands of the deer population were killed from the disease. They do not have a good track record of ensuring the safety or containment of diseases.
>
> "I personally do not have the data for this claim, but I have heard many people cite this as fact and no one at CSU is refuting the claim."

CWD, "a contagious neurological disease that affects members of the deer family, causing erratic behavior and weight loss that eventually results in death," was first identified in 1967. It is described as "a mysterious malady intricately tied to Fort Collins." The federal government declared a CWD state of emergency in 2001.

The Colorodoan reported that CWD "was related to scrapie in sheep and goats, mad cow disease in cattle and the fatal variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans."

As reported by Northern Colorado NPR affiliate KUNC, "Chronic wasting disease is not your garden variety infectious disease. It's not bacterial, viral or even fungal. It's caused by something we all have inside our bodies — something called prions."

CSU is home to the Prion Research Center, which "studies the biochemistry, genetics, and pathogenesis of prions, the causative agent of incurable and often fatal diseases in humans and animals," including bovine spongiform encephalopathy, classic Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, CWD and scrapie.

According to the Prion Research Center, "Growing evidence also links the prion mechanism to proteins involved in the pathogenesis of other common neurodegenerative diseases, including Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, and forms an emerging area of the center's studies."

And in 2019, CSU reported that Prion Research Center scientists "have developed a new gene-targeted approach" to study CWS in mice. Described as a "real breakthrough," the scientists "replaced the gene that encodes the prion protein in the mouse and replaced it with an exact replica of the code from either deer or elk."

Researchers who spoke to The Colorodoan said that while it's unclear if CWD originated in Fort Collins, it is hypothesized that it crossed species and spread there.

A U.S. Geological Survey map shows a significant cluster of CWD near Fort Collins and that cases identified elsewhere have been connected to the region.

A 2021 paper, "Text mining to identify the origin of chronic wasting disease," published in the Issues in Information Systems journal, states:

> "For the 16 [CWD] clusters in the first 40 years, the text mining process generated evidence supporting the trace back to Fort Collins for the first six clusters, five more clusters could be traced back to infected area linked to Fort Collins, and in 5 clusters the evidence supported an explanation for tracing the disease back to an area linked to Fort Collins.
>
> "The evidence does not definitively exclude other theories for the disease origin. At minimum, Fort Collins was a primary catalyst in the widespread distribution of the disease."

The paper noted, "As with COVID-19, government agencies can be reluctant to acknowledge potential culpability for releasing a devastating disease," adding that "Ignoring the likely origin of this disease discounts the lax management of captive animals that has been the driving force for this biological disaster."

Locals getting mixed messages from CSU officials

Local activists are concerned about a lack of communication between CSU officials, local authorities and the community, and contradictory statements they have received from CSU.

According to the CBRMC, CSU "gave citizens short notice on Nov. 30, 2022" about the public hearing, which was "held on the inconvenient date of Dec. 21, 2022 — snuck into holiday break."

Since then, CSU has "not conducted any informational meetings with the public regarding their proposed research lab," the CBRMC says on its website.

Bowman said a fact sheet about the facility was distributed at the meeting, stating that "SARS-CoV, SARS-CoV-2, MERS-CoV, Ebola virus, Marburg, Nipah virus and Hendra virus" would be studied at the lab, confirming information included in the February 2022 CSU Board of Governors report.

However, according to Bowman, Moritz said at the public hearing, "At this facility, we will not be able to study MERS, SARS-CoV-2 [or] Ebola viruses."

"So, which is it, are they proposing to study these diseases in our backyard or not?" Bowman asked.

Bowman noted that the same fact sheet contains "a photo displayed prominently on the front with a person's gloveless hand holding a bat." She remarked:

> "When you are touting the strength of your ability to do dangerous bat research with safety first and foremost, maybe you should shouldn't incorporate a photo of an irresponsible way to handle a bat.
>
> "Couldn't this be one way bat diseases transmit to humans and is proving our point that bats and humans shouldn't mix, especially in a lab setting?"

An April 5 email from Greg Harrison, CSU associate vice president of Strategic Communications, to Bowman, said, "We do not have any public meeting about the facility scheduled at this time."

This was despite a Jan. 24 email from Moritz to Bowman saying CSU was "working on a process to engage the public this spring to discuss the project and lab safety and security, as well as our commitment to the wellbeing of people in Colorado and around the world."

Both emails are posted in CBRMC's Facebook group. In the same group, Bowman referenced a March 15 Town Hall meeting with Sen. John Hickenlooper (D-Colo.) where the issue was to be raised. According to Bowman, "Sen. Hickenlooper chose not to answer any [questions] re: concern over CSU's COVID bat lab."

Bowman said this was not the only instance where elected officials ignored the concerns of local residents. She told The Defender:

> "The community has been sending this information to our elected officials, who have also stonewalled us. I got no response from Sen. Hickenlooper.
>
> "The response I got from Sen. Michael Bennet [D-Colo.] spoke about diversity, equity and inclusion and did not address the subject of bat research at all. The mayor of Fort Collins [Jeni Arndt] says that it is not in her jurisdiction and was uninterested."

Bowman said that local residents deserve answers. She told The Defender:

> "I believe that the residents of this county, state, and this country deserve answers to our questions regarding any potential danger to the public from this type of research considering the mayhem and destruction that the COVID virus unleashed on mankind.
>
> "We do not want a repeat, and I think we should be allowed to have some say in what happens in our backyard. The fact that CSU is stonewalling their neighbors speaks volumes."

Collaboration between CSU scientists, NIH, EcoHealth Alliance on bat viruses

Documents obtained by USRTK following several Freedom of Information Act requests indicate that plans for the new facility date back prior to receipt of the NIH grant in 2021, while key figures involved with the laboratory are connected to the EcoHealth Alliance and prior research involving SARS-CoV-2.

According to USRTK, the documents reveal that in February 2017, personnel of the U.S. Department of Defense's Cooperative Biological Engagement Program "announced a new global bat alliance," which would "build and leverage country and regional capabilities to generate an enhanced understanding of bats and their ecology within the context of pathogens of security concern."

This new alliance was a collaboration between CSU, EcoHealth Alliance and the NIH's Rocky Mountain Laboratories with the goal of building a bat research facility at CSU.

USRTK's documents reveal that this original alliance grew into a group which became known as Bat One Health Research Network, whose scientists, including CSU and Rocky Mountain Laboratories researchers, were developing "scalable vectored" and "self-disseminating" vaccines to spread contagiously between bats.

These vaccines are purportedly aimed at preventing "emergence and spillover" of potential pandemic viruses from bats to humans. However, at least as far back as 2020, concerns were raised about the unintended consequences of releasing genetically engineered self-spreading "vaccines" into the wild.

Bat One Health also harkens to the "One Health" concept, which purports to serve as "an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems," but which some experts have argued lowers human health to the level of animals and aims to surveil and control all life on Earth.

Notably, the term "One Health" is said to have first been coined by the EcoHealth Alliance, which today is a strong proponent of this concept.

A March 30, 2020, email obtained by USRTK, from Tony Schountz, Ph.D., associate professor in CSU's Department of Microbiology, Immunology and Pathology, to Jonathan Epstein, vice president for Science and Outreach at EcoHealth Alliance, discusses the importation of bats and rats infected with dangerous pathogens such as the Lassa virus.

In another set of emails from 2018, Schountz communicated with scientists from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. In an Oct. 30, 2018, email, Schountz proposed a "loose association" between CSU and the Wuhan lab, involving "collaboration on relevant projects" involving bat-borne viruses and arboviruses.

Indicating the connection between the research planned to take place at the new facility, and COVID-19, Rebekah Kading, Ph.D., assistant professor in CSU's Department of Microbiology, Immunology and Pathology, said, "This facility is especially timely considering the current COVID-19 pandemic, since some groups of bats have an evolutionary association with coronaviruses."

According to CSU, the university has a partnership with Zoetis, which it describes as "the world's leading animal health company," "for the construction in 2020 of an incubator research lab in the Research Innovation Center on the Foothills campus."

Zoetis was previously Pfizer Animal Health, before separating from Pfizer in June 2013.

Big Pharma, NIH interested in developing vaccines related to viruses to be researched at new CSU facility

Big Pharma has shown interest in developing mRNA vaccines targeting many of the same deadly pathogens that will be researched at CSU's new facility.

For instance, in July 2022, Moderna announced the launch of its Phase 1 clinical trial of the mRNA-1215 vaccine candidate, "designed to fight the Nipah virus." The vaccine was developed in collaboration with NIAID's Vaccine Research Center.

In an NIH statement, Fauci said "Nipah virus poses a considerable pandemic threat because it mutates relatively easily, causes disease in a wide range of mammals, can transmit from person-to-person, and kills a large percentage of the people it infects," adding that "The need for a preventive Nipah virus vaccine is significant."

Efforts to develop a Nipah virus vaccine date back to at least January 2017, when CEPI (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations) issued a call for proposals for the development of vaccines for the Nipah and Lassa viruses and MERS, soon after its official launch at that year's meeting of the World Economic Forum.

EcoHealth Alliance researchers have long shown interest in viruses such as Nipah. A 2006 article in the Current Infectious Disease Reports journal titled "Nipah virus: impact, origins, and causes of emergence" was co-authored by Epstein, for instance.

At the time, Epstein was affiliated with the Consortium for Conservation Medicine, which later merged with the Wildlife Trust to become the EcoHealth Alliance.

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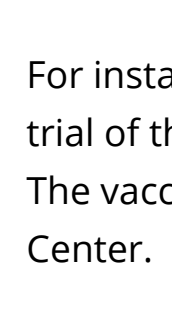

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Michael Nevradakis, Ph.D., based in Athens, Greece, is a senior reporter for The Defender and part of the rotation of hosts for CHD.TV's "Good Morning CHD."

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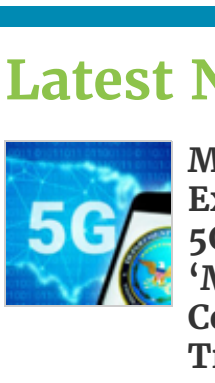

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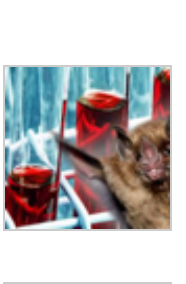

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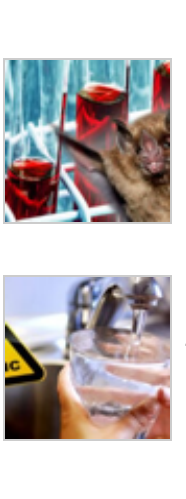

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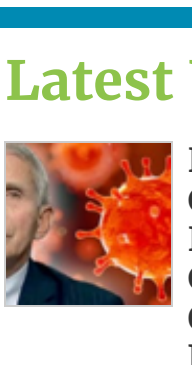

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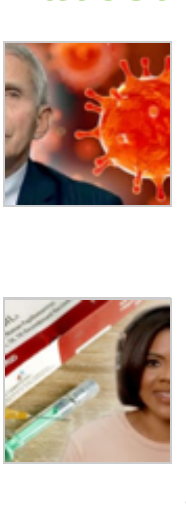

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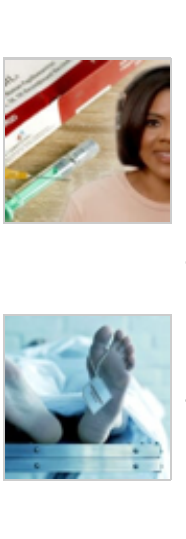

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emerged from Plum Island and is most concentrated in the region around it. So of course what do the feds and experts do? Build a bat 'research' facility right in that area too. Bat-***t crazy!

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Robert Yochim

5 hours ago

This whole thing smells fishy. I wonder if Fauci has a finger in this one.

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questionitall

5 hours ago

Absolute insanity! It no longer matters what heinous things have been done and who has gotten caught doing them. Nobody is ever prosecuted and they just continue on their merry way... WTF?

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Jean-Claude Joseph

5 hours ago

cela se finira par une guerre meurtrière de toutes les sociétés contre les oligarchies , multinationales et politiciens inféodés: il n'y aura pas d'autre moyen de les empêcher de continuer à détruire le monde et réduire en quasi-esclavage une part de plus en plus importante de la population.

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E_via

4 hours ago

Looks like the... bats are coming home (from Wuhan) to roost. What could possibly go wrong?

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gnt

4 hours ago

I love all the contradictions in CSU's statements... no gain-of-function research "of concern" (who defines what "of concern" is?) while admitting proudly that they conduct gain-of-function research there. Saying they won't research deadly viruses in the new facility while touting research that will take place involving those very same viruses. Claiming it will be BSL2 when all those toxins are classified at BSL4 level. The list goes on and on but obviously these are the actions of an institution that is operating on the up and up...

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Leslie N

4 hours ago edited

i literally will not even read this article. this is more fear mongering to get people to unwillingly sign up for deadly medical interventions. no verifiable viruses ever viewed under any type of microscope, no proof of anything but population reduction. wake up people.

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